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# Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Processes in Education: New Approaches for New Times

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**Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Processes in Education: New Approaches for New Times**  
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The United States has undergone two dramatic changes with respect to race in education over the past fifty years. First, in the next five years a majority of all children in the United States will be black, Latino, Asian, Native American or a combination of races (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015). Second, since the Civil Rights Movement there has been increasing acceptance of diversity and multiculturalism in the United States, and a decline of overtly racist racial attitudes (Alba & Nee, 2003; Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1997). At the same time, we have seen renewed attention in the very recent past to anti-black violence, especially in the hands of the state, as well as mass incarceration and what some call a “school to prison pipeline” (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

These shifts and their consequences, sometimes unexpected, raise important questions that sociologists of education have yet to answer. The existing scholarship in stratification documents important ongoing racial and ethnic disparities in education—important for public awareness that there *is*, in fact, a dramatic race problem in the United States. Still, it does not provide a path forward. In order to determine how to attack these carefully-documented disparities, and to learn from the documented successes in reducing racial inequality, we need to understand the mechanisms by which they happen. Further, a deeper understanding of race, education, and the lives of young people should look beyond academic outcomes, to broader social processes, which can contribute to our understanding of society overall. As labs for observing social dynamics, race relations, and status hierarchies, educational institutions showcase important social and cultural processes that sociologists of education can mine for a deeper understanding of social life.

I argue that methods that focus on underlying social and cultural processes in education will provide important insights related to these topics. This investigation requires methods that historically have not been at the core of the field of sociology of education, as defined by what is printed in the flagship journal, *Sociology of Education*, such as investigating differences *within* racial and ethnic groups to illuminate how racial and ethnic forces influence education.

Scholarship that employs these methods to reveal social and cultural processes related to youth and education should be taken more seriously by the core of the field. Further, I identify five rich areas for investigation in the sociology of race, ethnicity, and education related to our changed racial landscape:

- First, how do individuals make meaning of race, and how do educational institutions influence that meaning-making?
- Second, how does race play into the often-perceived tension between, on the one hand, access, inclusion and democracy, and on the other, meritocracy? In other words, how does our racial history and changing demographics and culture shape and get shaped by struggles over meritocracy, inclusion, and opportunity? Relatedly, how does “diversity” shape school and university cultures and the consequent experiences of students, teachers, and staff?
- Third, how, if at all, is Asian American educational success changing dominant culture(s)?
- Fourth, how do elites from nondominant groups such as minorities and those from modest income families navigate systems of privilege and racialized domination?
- Lastly, from an institutional standpoint the sociology of education needs to engage more deeply with the fields of Critical Race Theory and critical pedagogy.

I conclude by suggesting that a greater emphasis on studies that employ the tools of the sociology of culture, developing theoretical arguments through in-depth, qualitative empirical research, will provide important insights into the sociology of education and race.<sup>i</sup> This means employing complex conceptions of culture that go beyond values and essentialized understandings of racial and ethnic groups. Mario Small, David Harding, and Michele Lamont (2010) highlight scholarship in the study of culture and poverty that moves beyond simplistic, sometimes racist “culture of poverty” explanations. They identify frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutions as specific concepts that have been employed in important ways to engage questions of culture and inequality. Sociologists of education and race, too, should use these tools to illuminate important cultural processes that will provide insights beyond documenting inequality by race. In addition, the sociology of organizations can help inform our understanding of how racial meanings are produced in schools and universities.

For reasons of brevity, and because American sociology of education remains focused on the US, I limit most of this discussion to race in the United States, where racial inequality is rooted in Native American genocide and displacement, African American slavery, and large waves of immigration, both legal and undocumented. In the conclusion I address the need for greater attention to non-US contexts.

### **A Changing United States**

A slight majority of young children in the United States today are racial or ethnic minorities, compared to 38% of the total US population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). One driver of this shift is the fact that the United States is home to the largest number of immigrants in its

history, with over 41 million immigrants residing in the country today, 13% of the US population (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.-b). Among children, one in four has an immigrant parent, and about half of those children are immigrants themselves (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.-a). Relatedly, the 2000 Census was the first time that African Americans were not the biggest minority group in the United States, outnumbered by Latinos, so the black-white dichotomous way of treating race relations in prior years has shifted. Already Latinos outnumber non-Hispanic whites in California (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). As a consequence, in California today and in many other parts of the country, “third-plus” generation Americans—those who are US-born with US-born parents—must contend with growing diversity in their communities, and the changes that come with that diversity (Jimenez, 2017). Lastly, one in twenty children identifies with two or more races, and that number is growing (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015).

While the ethnic and racial composition in the United States has changed, so too have racial attitudes among ordinary Americans. Overtly racist attitudes in the United States have declined precipitously in the past half century, and overall, Americans are more likely to accept racial and ethnic differences, at least at a superficial level. For example, in the early 1940s nearly one-third of white Americans believed black and white children should attend separate schools; by the mid-1990s that percentage was less than 5% (Bobo, 2001). Relatedly, a cultural shift in recent decades has led to an embracing of multiculturalism and diversity. For example, today many school children celebrate the life of Martin Luther King and his moderate ideas about racial equality (but not about many other, more radical racial justice leaders, or about King’s views on economic justice), and many urban schools host international nights that celebrate the cuisines and holidays of the countries of origin of their students.

Shifts in immigrant incorporation are related to African American history. Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) have argued that the United States is more inclusive of ethnic and racial identities today than it was in the past. Alba and Nee redefine assimilation as a declining social distance between social groups, rather than minorities becoming part of a dominant white group as previously conceptualized. Overall, these changes stem in part from the victories of the African American-led Civil Rights Movement, which highlighted the moral injustices of racial segregation, and won legal protections for racial minorities such as court-ordered school desegregation, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act. In addition, institutionalized supports for minorities developed in organizations, because segregation's moral illegitimacy was made clearer to many previously opposed to integration, and in other instances to avoid legal vulnerability or racial unrest (Dobbin, 2009; Stulberg & Chen, 2014). Universities instituted affirmative action, and student activists helped create minority students' groups, departments of African American and Ethnic Studies, and minority student centers on many campuses (Rojas, 2007; Stulberg & Chen, 2014). Today, immigrants and their children benefit from many of these rights and institutions (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008). Overall, then, the Civil Rights Movement changed the legal and cultural context of race in the United States, changing the setting in which immigrants and their children navigate American society. Further, national legislation and Supreme Court decisions provided some legal recourse to ongoing racial discrimination and inequality.

Still, ongoing overt racism, brutal at times, continues, as events of the recent past make very clear. Some argue that the criminal justice system in particular is "the new Jim Crow," given American mass incarceration and the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans (M. Alexander, 2010). Further, Waters and Kasinitz (2015) argue that legal exclusion, whether

for African Americans or undocumented immigrants, has come to define an individual's social life even more than race, at times excluding individuals from rights, civic participation, and humanity, like racial exclusion did prior to the Civil Rights Era. In addition, civil rights legislation has led some to argue that we live in a colorblind era, even while racial injustice continues; some scholars describe this discourse of colorblindness amidst racial inequality as colorblind racism (for example, see Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Discourses of colorblindness allow some to ignore, for example, the disproportionate referral of black youth into special needs classrooms (Blanchett, 2006), or for school suspension and expulsion (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), as unrelated to race. Claims about colorblindness and a post-racial society also ignore the ongoing impact of residential segregation and inequality, shaped by social policies of the past like redlining (Massey & Denton, 1993). These policies led to today's urban poverty, and racially stratified school experiences, which endure over generations (Sharkey, 2013).

What does this racial landscape mean for the study of race and education in social life? I turn next to methods and scholarship that will allow researchers to understand the mechanisms of change and persistence.

### **New (and Old) Methods for New Times**

While a complex portrait of immigrant and African American pathways to and through education is emerging from the scholarship on stratification, research investigating the mechanisms of inequality can deepen our understanding of the complex social processes in and out of schools that affect the lives of children and adult learners. Below I highlight recent work in the area of race and education that employs methods suitable for investigating mechanisms of racial change, meaning-making, and cultural and status processes. I highlight recent scholarship

that employs two important, but underutilized methodological strategies: selecting on the dependent variable, and explaining within-group differences. Taking seriously this work and work like it will refresh the field and enable it to say more about the relationships between race, ethnicity, education, and society.

### *Selecting on the dependent variable*

In Statistics 101, we teach students to never select on the dependent variable, because this introduces selection bias. However, many important qualitative studies have done just that, providing deep insights into how uncommon, but much-preferred outcomes emerge. These studies reveal the conditions and mechanisms through which, for example, youth succeed in low-performing schools, and college students develop cross-racial friendships that confront racial inequality. Indeed, textbooks of qualitative research often tell students to select cases for their uniqueness, rather than representativeness. For example, in his groundbreaking *Global Ethnography*, Michael Burawoy (2009) argues for the “extended case method”, whereby cases are chosen explicitly for their uniqueness rather than their generalizability. Similarly, Mario Small (2009) suggests that researchers choose cases or even interview respondents precisely for a set of characteristics that they hold.

Many insightful studies in the field of racial inequality in education select on the dependent variable to illuminate pathways to success. For example, Carla O’Connor (1997) and Dorinda Carter Andrews (Andrews, 2009; D. Carter, 2008) have written highly-cited articles about African American high-achievers, based on in-depth studies of only high-achievers. They reveal the importance of particular forms of racial identity as well as family narratives about collective struggle in supporting those students’ success. Robert Smith (2008) has done the same



through an in-depth analysis of a single case study Mexican American student. Gloria Ladson-Billings' classic study of teachers who are successful in promoting their African American students' success, *The Dreamkeepers* (1994), provides an in-depth look at what those teachers do to promote their students' success. She finds that this work inevitably includes strengthening cultural identities, and drawing from students' individual strengths. In higher education, Shaun Harper (2008) studies the experiences of high-achieving African American men; he describes, among other things, the ways in which they leverage social capital to further personal goals successfully. Together these studies of non-modal occurrences demonstrate pathways beyond the structural barriers that prevent many from success. As a consequence, beyond their theoretical implications the studies provide important insights into how to increase educational opportunities.

Other studies select on negative outcomes. For example, in his book, *Punished*, Victor Rios (2011) reveals the troubled relationship between delinquent black and Latino youth and the criminal justice system, in which criminality is assumed. Rios reveals, too, the spaces for resistance and agency in this system for the young men. Overall, these studies that select on the dependent variable provide insights into what leads to particular outcomes. Their in-depth case study approaches allow the scholars to go deep, revealing complexity in the pathways to either desired or undesired outcomes. They all help us understand mechanisms through which students, teachers, schools, and even campus organizations sometimes promote positive experiences for minority groups. Some may quibble that these studies suffer from a lack of counterfactual evidence. As a scholarly community our response should be to conduct further studies to test the insights of studies that select on the dependent variable, perhaps through quantitative measures

of larger populations, rather than dismissing the potentially groundbreaking insights the qualitative studies provide.

Beyond selecting on the dependent variable, studies that employ qualitative methods to look across groups can identify when behaviors, outlooks, and narratives are related to a particular group, and when they are not. For example, Karolyn Tyson's (2011; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005) comparisons of schools with different racial makeups demonstrate that while black youth in integrated schools sometimes accuse high-achieving peers of "acting white"—a set of behavioral characteristics that includes styles of dress and comportment, but not achievement—white students, too, sometimes tease high-achieving white peers, for "acting high and mighty." In addition, Tyson demonstrates how racialized tracking systems implicitly tell students that achievement is "white," because higher tracks are associated with white students, lower tracks with minority students. This work reveals the mechanisms by which achievement sometimes is racialized as "white," even while almost all students, across race and achievement lines, aspire to succeed in school. Tyson shows that black students define achievement in racial terms in certain kinds of school contexts, where most students in high tracks are white, but not in predominantly black schools, where high achievers are also black. In my study of second generation youth, I found that youth of all ethnic groups attempted to gain status among their peers, but that the markers of peer status differed across groups (Warikoo, 2011). For example, while a taste for hip-hop gained status across groups, non-black youth who exhibited stylistic markers of hip-hop were sometimes accused of "acting black", and consequently had to attenuate those styles, or blend them with ethnic markers, such as wearing gold necklaces in hip-hop style but with a Sikh or Muslim religious symbol as the pendant. Both of these studies benefit from looking qualitatively across ethnic and racial groups.

### *Examining variation within groups*

Studies of “The black-white test-score gap” (Jencks & Phillips, 1998) emphasize the continued statistical significance of race after controlling for a host of measures, including socioeconomic status, parental education, and much more. These studies have been very important in raising the issue of racial inequality in education—in fact, they led Republican President George Bush to include requirements that school accountability data be disaggregated by race (and disability and English as a second language status), to highlight when school achievement gains are stratified by race (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). However, in order to change those gaps and identify promising pathways to success for historically marginalized groups, we need to examine differences *within* race groups, rather than solely identifying trends along race lines. As with selecting on the dependent variable, looking at differences within groups highlights the mechanisms by which individual kids experience academic success, social status, and more.

In one such study, Nilda Flores-Gonzales (2002) demonstrates how a Chicago high school produces “school” and “street” identities among Puerto Rican students, leading those with “street” identities to drop out. Within-group differences need not be related to school completion or achievement. Carla Shedd’s (2015) study of four predominantly minority Chicago high schools reveals how location and the distance between a high schooler’s home and school can shape students’ understandings of the police, justice, and equity. In her book on black and Latino young people living in public housing in Yonkers, New York, Prudence Carter (2005) outlines three orientations toward school that explain differences between her respondents’ behaviors in school and their ethnic and racial identities. “Cultural mainstreamers,” as Carter calls them,

adhere to the dominant, adult-sponsored culture at school. “Noncompliant believers,” on the other hand, want to succeed in school but do not always adhere to the dominant school culture, sometimes landing them in trouble despite their desire for school success. Finally, “cultural straddlers” manage to both engage in behaviors and dispositions necessary to achieve school success while also maintaining strong ethnic or racial identities. Cultural straddlers are skilled in code-switching between the two social worlds in which they move. Similarly, my book on children of immigrants in diverse high schools illuminates the different ways in which kids perform “Balancing Acts” between school expectations and their desire for peer status (Warikoo, 2011). Some youth focus on their desire for peer status to the detriment of school success, despite their best intentions. Others have a more singular focus on academic success, and end up exhibiting cultural markers that mark them as low status among their peers, such as large backpacks, little socializing, and quiet demeanor. Finally, those successful in the balancing act manage to maintain peer status as well as school success. I illuminate in the book school rules, organizational aspects of the school, racialized expectations, and constraints that prevent more children from success in the balancing act.

Some scholars have examined variation by gender. For example, Nancy Lopez’s (2002) study of Dominican students at a New York high school shows the different treatment young Dominican women and men experience in school. Young women are provided more flexibility with respect to school rules; their stereotype as teenaged mothers does not adversely affect teacher interactions as much as the stereotype of Dominican young men as dangerous and aggressive affects those young men. Teachers are consequently more strict and authoritarian with young men, with conflicts escalating more frequently and more dramatically between young men and school authorities. Simone Ispa-Landa (2013) studied the gendered experiences of black

students participating in a busing program to bring urban minority youth to predominantly white, suburban schools. She finds that gendered constructions of beauty, masculinity, and athletics together led black boys to have an easier time integrating socially than their female peers (see also Holland, 2012).

Outside of schools, Maria Rendon's (2014) study of Latino young men living two high-poverty Los Angeles neighborhoods describes how some end up getting "caught up" in urban violence and as a result, end up dropping out of school, while others manage to avoid getting entangled in urban violence (see also Harding, 2010). Rendon identifies engaged fathers and attending a school outside of the neighborhood as protective factors that sometimes shielded young men from getting entangled in neighborhood violence.

Promising new work in higher education has unpacked differences in the experiences of students from nondominant backgrounds. For example, Maya Beasley (2011) demonstrates the role of university structures, including supports for minority students and the racial makeup of the student body, in her comparison of the career choices of black graduates of Berkeley and Stanford. Through her comparison of graduates of the two universities she is able to illuminate the social networks, campus activities, and campus experiences that shape career choices for graduates. Tony Jack's (2014) study of black students from low-income families attending an elite university reveals two kinds of experiences, marked by students' prior schooling. The "privileged poor" enter college with experiences in privileged high schools through magnet schools or through programs such as A Better Chance and scholarships to private schools, bringing to college insights and skills for navigating predominantly white institutions and social worlds. In contrast, the "doubly disadvantaged" come from urban high schools serving disadvantaged families, and consequently college is their first experiences with the academic

demands, cultural expectations, and social world of privilege and majority white spaces, putting them at a greater disadvantage than their “privileged poor” peers. Smith and Moore (2000) identify factors shaping black students’ feelings of inclusion in the black community on their college campuses.

The studies above examine variation within racial and ethnic groups. Some show variation along explicit lines such as gender and school-level characteristics, while others show that identity development, influenced by a variety of social and psychological experiences, as well as neighborhood effects and social networks lead to different orientations among same-race students, even within the same local community and gender. The studies illuminate the pathways in and through education for students, which can inform teacher practices, leadership, and policymaking to improve school experiences for all children. While academic achievement is one aspect of these school experiences, identity development, social integration, and psychological well-being are some of the myriad other important domains addressed in this work.

Overall, the scholarship I have highlighted above demonstrates the kinds of research that will provide deeper understandings of the inner-workings of schools and universities, and of the impact of the new American racial landscape on education writ large. Future studies might select on the dependent variable or examine variation by, for example, studying variability in conceptions of race, and how those conceptions develop; studying high achievers across racial lines; examining differences in Asian American experiences in schools; and identifying measures of successful critical pedagogy and studying how they came about, what supports them, and their impact. I turn next to these and other new areas for inquiry, for which the tools of sociological analysis can uncover important insights.

## **New Topics for New Times**

Numerous areas for fruitful inquiry in the sociology of education and race are emerging. Below I identify five areas of scholarship that demonstrate the kinds of questions that will make for a broader, deeper sociology of education. These examples illustrate the complexity and rich insights to be gained by using qualitative methods, looking beyond academic outcomes, and borrowing tools from other fields, especially the sociology of culture and the sociology of organizations.

### *Schools, universities, and the production of race*

Schools are frequently taken-for-granted as the place in which children develop their understandings of the social world, including race. However, we do not yet know just how that racial meaning develops. How and when, for example, do schools reinforce or mute racial stereotypes as children develop their understandings of race? Sociologists of race and ethnicity have highlighted processes of racial formation (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998) and racial domination (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009), and the racial attitudes literature has debated the origins of new racism (psychological versus feelings of group threat versus political views). However, we need in-depth studies of the *production* of racial attitudes, whether in families, schools, or other institutions. This will require more ethnographic portraits of language and interaction in schools and in families, beyond survey measures of feelings of group threat or prejudice (see Skrentny, 2008 for a similar argument). Understanding individual meaning-making around race and the complex organizational influences on that meaning making will reveal how conceptions of race are reproduced, and, sometimes, how they shift.

Some new scholarship has started to develop this field. For example, Ann Morning (2011) has investigated how professors and undergraduates make meaning of what race *is* and what it *does*. Warikoo and de Novais (2015) analyze undergraduate understandings of the role that race plays in society, highlighting the influence of university cultures related to diversity on those understandings. In K12 education, Amanda Lewis's (2003) ethnography of a predominantly white, suburban school illuminates how schools teach children about race, even while espousing a 'colorblind' stance (see also P. L. Carter, 2012; Pollock, 2004). Overall, the sociology of education can contribute important analyses of how educational organizations influence racial meaning-making, drawing tools from the sociology of organizations. This research is crucial if we want to identify the production of racial meanings that influence so much of social life in the United States.

### *Democracy and Meritocracy*

The dual shifts over the past half century toward meritocracy and civil rights warrant further investigation. That is, how do organizations and ordinary people make sense of the quest for equality of opportunities alongside desires for meritocracy? How do these considerations shape conceptions of fairness, especially in the face of racially and socioeconomically unequal outcomes? Classic theories in sociology address the question of meritocracy. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Seymour Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (1992) argued that equal opportunity and mobility in fact characterize industrial societies. This mobility rests on a meritocracy to mete out rewards. Later, Daniel Bell (1973) described a new "post-industrial society", in which a system of social rewards based on merit and achievement rather than inherited status would allow leaders to solve the most pressing social problems. Max Weber (1968) further envisioned meritocracy as a tool



for promoting equity and justice in modern societies. At the same time, during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century more white Americans began to recognize ongoing injustices toward African Americans as illegitimate. Racial discrimination—both interpersonal and structural—called into question the well-functioning of American meritocracy. Of course, racial oppression has characterized black-white relations for centuries. However, it was not until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that a majority of whites began to question this systematic exclusion and oppression. How do the institutionalized systems of meritocracy and mobility, which undergird American ideology about equal opportunity and justice, respond to the now-recognized exclusion of African Americans from the American dream? More recently, renewed attention to anti-black violence has led more whites to recognize ongoing racial biases, calling the rhetoric of colorblindness into question; what new forms of democracy will ensue, given this recognition?

The most radical critiques of racial inequality in education related to merit call for the dismantling of merit-based systems altogether, with the belief that they are inherently undemocratic. This position was victorious at the City University of New York (CUNY) amidst battles over admissions policies, leading in 1970 to open admissions (Reuben, 2001). A different solution to African American exclusion was to create mechanisms for (limited) social mobility among African Americans. This is what most selective colleges did. Unlike CUNY, they simply shifted their definitions of merit to accommodate concerns over racial inequality, through affirmative action, thus maintaining the elite systems and restoring their legitimacy (Grodsky, 2007; Reuben, 2001).

After the 1960s, rationales for affirmative action shifted. Ellen Berrey (2015) demonstrates how universities and other institutional contexts developed understandings of race that center on “diversity”, with implications for the cost of that framing for advancing racial

justice. In other words, in order to make affirmative action palatable to the old elites, it was increasingly couched as beneficial to whites due to the inclusion of diverse perspectives, rather than as a form of redress in the name of racial justice and maintaining the legitimacy of meritocracy. Affirmative action was no longer needed to restore faith in the American ideology of equal opportunity, now that Civil Rights legislation mandated equal opportunities, and whites could adopt a “colorblind” ideology (see also Gallagher, 2008; Moore & Bell, 2011). All of this has happened while admission rates to elite colleges have declined steadily; today, admissions rates to top colleges in the US are well under 10% of those who even dare to apply, a fact highlighted frequently by universities, implicitly suggesting that low admissions rates are measures of status and a flourishing meritocracy.

New research should analyze the implications of this relationship between race and meritocracy today. The literature in higher education on campus racial climate has examined the impact of affirmative action on minority and white students alike, seeking to understand the benefits of diversity on everything from students’ racial attitudes to academic performance (see Harper & Hurtado, 2007 for a review). Still, scholars have neglected the ensuing cultural processes. How, for example, do student understandings of affirmative action shape racial dynamics on campus? How do they shape conceptions of justice and merit? (see Warikoo, 2016). How do schools promote the notion of opportunity and mobility to children for whom school inequality and racial segregation are obvious? These are just some of the important unanswered questions related to meritocracy and democracy that new scholarship in the sociology of education should address.

*Asian American educational success*

What happens when a minority group is more successful than the dominant, majority group? Sociologists have much to contribute to public discussions about Asian American educational success. Asian Americans are overrepresented at elite public schools that admit students on the basis of a standardized test, like New York City's Stuyvesant High School, which is 74% Asian. The same is true at selective colleges, where Asian Americans represent 14% of the student body,<sup>ii</sup> compared to 5.6% of the US population (Espenshade, Radford, & Chung, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Despite their overrepresentation, Asian American students' SAT scores are higher on average than their white peers' SAT scores at the same university (Espenshade et al., 2009). Asian American excellence appears in academic extracurricular activities, as well. For example, Indian Americans have dominated the national spelling bee in recent years (Basu, 2015). These gains lead to the important empirical question of what happens when a minority group outperforms the majority group. Does the stratification system change, or does the minority group redefine the dominant culture? Asian Americans in traditionally white, advantaged communities may sometimes be perceived as changing local cultures, to ones in which academic achievement is marked as "Asian" and whiteness is marked as "slacker" (Jimenez and Horowitz, 2013). Relatedly, how does Asian American success shape whites' definitions of merit and success? Frank Samson (2013) has demonstrated that when whites are reminded of Asian Americans' high GPAs, they downplay the importance of GPA in selective college admissions; on the other hand, when they are reminded of black Americans' low GPAs, they express strong belief in the use of GPA to judge applicants. This suggests that as Asian American successes continue, whites may shift their definitions of merit and success to maintain white privilege. Relatedly, some have critiqued elite college admissions for supposed Asian American quotas, akin to the Jewish quotas of the 1920s, achieved by shifting the criteria for

“merit” in admissions (Karabel, 2005). All of this suggests that Asian American successes are beginning to chip away at white privilege, and as they do so whites may find other ways to maintain their privileges and “group position” (Blumer, 1958).

In addition to white responses to Asian American success, we need more studies of Asian Americans. In a study that goes well beyond the model minority debate, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015) discuss Asian Americans’ linking of race with certain forms of school success. As Lee and Zhou show, Asian Americans’ unique ‘success frames’ play a role in Asian American high achievement. Moreover, they sometimes link Asian identity with high achievement, with negative repercussions for Asian youth who cannot meet the high standards of success expected in their success frames. Relatedly, worrisome mental health issues among Asian Americans have emerged (Bachman, O’Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2011; US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, n.d.), and sociologists of education can highlight social processes in schools and families explaining this growth.

### *Elites, Race, and Education*

Beyond Asian Americans, greater attention to social processes among the advantaged is needed (see also Khan, 2012). Missing from the emerging literature on the sociology of elites are, as Khan (2012) highlights, studies of “new” elites—that is, elite racial minorities, elite women, and elites of other underrepresented groups. In addition, how does the changing face of elites change the status and cultural practices that go hand-in-hand with being elite? Does an expanded elite, for example, change the nature of elite organizations to make them more inclusive and effective? Studies of new elites will allow scholars to better understand how processes of status legitimation, racial identity, and more change, if at all, when women,

individuals from working class families, and racial minorities join the ranks of elites. Writing about students of color attending an elite boarding school, Gaztambide-Fernandez and DiAquoi (2010) highlight their experiences of what DuBois long ago labeled “double-consciousness”—they are “in, but not of” their elite school. Other work mentioned above contributes to this question, including Ispa-Landa’s (2013) work on minority kids bused to wealthy suburban districts, and Jack’s work on black students attending elite universities (2014). Beyond formal education, Lauren Rivera’s (2015) investigation of the hiring process for recent graduates finds that black and Latino candidates are often judged for lacking “polish”, and are otherwise frequently bypassed based on subjective dislike on the part of white interviewers.

Relatedly, ‘omnivorous’ tastes, including related to minority taste cultures, have increasingly become markers of high status (Peterson & Kern, 1996). This intervention into Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of culture and social reproduction requires more work on the resulting cultural processes—related to stratification and otherwise. That is, while scholarship in the sociology of culture has documented the taste preferences of elites, we know less about the impact of those taste preferences, and what role racialized understandings play in that impact—for example, rap and hip-hop’s identities as black. In addition, we need more work illuminating not only how this shift changes racialized conceptions of status, but also how those shifts change the social world. For example, how do youth taste preferences, across class lines, change over time? Where do changes start—among elites, among non-elites, or among minority groups overall? In addition, when multiculturalism is accepted as a moral and cultural framework for status (Voyer, 2011), schools serving both elite and nonelite children attempt to school children in diversity, often through superficial “international potlucks” and related events. Sociologists of race and education should investigate this shift, and the meaning children make of this

understanding of diversity. Overall, shifting perspectives on the importance of racial diversity and the benefits of diversity to whites and minorities alike (Berrey 2015), along with unique institutional supports for diversity on college campuses in particular (Warikoo 2016), influence students in schools and universities in new ways that a new sociology of education can mine for a deeper understanding of the changing racial landscape in the United States.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Lastly, sociologists of education need to contend with scholarship that engages Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theory that emphasizes the ways in which racism is embedded into institutions, in ways that are often invisible on first glance. On the one hand, based on scholarly engagement CRT is central to the sociology of education in the domain of race. A google scholar search of “sociology of education and race” yields articles related to three main topics: (1) introductions or reviews of the field; (2) work on racial stratification that employs quantitative data; and (3) work explicitly grounded in CRT. On the other hand, searches in the journal *Sociology of Education* for “critical race theory” and for “critical theory” yield no results.<sup>iii</sup> This suggests that mainstream scholarly engagement with CRT is strong, even if the flagship journal, as a gatekeeper, has not embraced this area.<sup>iv</sup> In education CRT scholars illuminate the ways in which schools perpetuate ideologies of colorblindness despite institutionalized racism embedded in schools (for a review, see Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; for early examples, see Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999). For example, CRT scholars argue that overtly race-neutral school funding policies and tracking have harmed African American youth and led to racially unequal access to high quality teaching (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). CRT critiques liberal individualist perspectives that emphasize ostensible equality of opportunities

while ignoring unequal outcomes. CRT scholars point out that gestures toward “multicultural education” do not address the institutionalized racism embedded in US society (Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). In higher education, Rashawn Ray (2012) finds that the organizational structure and “normative institutional arrangements” of predominantly white universities leaves white fraternities more able to avoid accountability for transgressions than are black fraternities; they also shape members’ engagement with women (Ray & Rosow, 2010). Critical race scholars have also critiqued the discourse of “diversity” as the rationale for affirmative action, for ignoring ongoing racial disparities and affirmative action as restorative justice (Moore & Bell, 2011; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). Shaun Harper and his colleagues (2009) similarly push the field of higher education and race to employ CRT in analyzing access and equity. Overall, scholarship that engages CRT has grown in prominence, especially among students eager to understand ongoing racial disparity in US education. Empirical work that operationalizes CRT and tests its explanations empirically is a promising area of scholarship; perhaps it is this empirical analysis that will allow CRT to become more central in the sociology of race and education as defined by the flagship journal.

A group of scholars that would align themselves with the perspectives of CRT, even if they are more focused on *action*, are those who write about “critical pedagogy”. These scholars, inspired by Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, envision education that teaches children to learn about and engage with the world not only as it is, but also as it might become (for example, see Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Giroux, 1983; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Henry Giroux (1983) was an early proponent of critical pedagogy, placing it between an understanding of social reproduction, which seemed to lack room for building capacity in children for social change, and pluralist visions for education, which deemphasized power

relations. Perhaps just as the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath in the 1960s fueled scholarly interest in social change and the sociology of social movements, so too might the field of critical pedagogy grow to occupy a corner of the sociology of education that outlines when and how children learn to become agents of social change through education. This understanding will take creative empirical scholarship that investigates the forms that critical pedagogy takes, its differences from “traditional” teaching, how and when it emerges, and its impact on children. This is an important and promising area for new research.

## **Conclusion**

Above I have highlighted innovative work in the sociology of education and race that addresses growing diversity and our changed racial landscape, and I have further identified areas for deeper investigation. Overall, the sociology of culture has much to offer to the field of sociology of education, just as it has done for the study of poverty (see also Skrentny, 2008; Small et al., 2010). When Mario Small, Michele Lamont, and David Harding (2010) wrote their review of how the tools of cultural sociology have been and can further be leveraged in the study of poverty, they brought their insights to Capitol Hill in an effort to reach policy-makers. A similar effort in the study of racial inequality in education, corraling the tools of cultural sociology, would be fruitful.

In order to do this, we need to define the parameters of rigorous scholarship. Most of the work I have highlighted is qualitative, but there is less agreement among scholars about how to evaluate qualitative research. Social psychologists tell us that when criteria of evaluation are unclear, implicit biases tend to have a greater impact on judgement (Olson and Fazio, 2009). Given the relatively low status of qualitative studies compared to those that employ econometric



tools, this is cause for concern. In order to attenuate those biases, we need shared understandings of high quality qualitative scholarship. Ten years ago Michele Lamont and colleagues discussed the construction of interdisciplinary standards for qualitative research (Lamont & White, 2005). Perhaps it is time to revisit that discussion.

Overall, sociologists of education should pay closer heed to qualitative studies that reveal the richness and complexity of race in society, rather than sticking too close to the historic bread and butter of our field, the study of stratification. Further, there is much to be gained by turning outward, in terms of both disciplinary boundaries as well as national boundaries. This means learning from rich qualitative studies of schools and youth by scholars of education in the United States who do not identify as sociologists—for example, see work cited above by young scholars trained and teaching in education, including that of D. Carter and Gaztambide-Fernandez, as well as others who are more established, such as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), and Lois Weis (2014).

In addition, we must look outside of the US. Looking beyond the United States allows us to see the impact of our racial and immigration history, along with related legal issues, bringing the specific qualities of the US that matter into full relief (for some examples, see C. Alexander, 2000; Dehanas, 2013; Fong, 2011; Hall, 2002; Teeger, 2015). British sociologist Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977), a qualitative study of working class boys in England, appears on many, perhaps most syllabi in the sociology of education; and yet, more recent work located in places outside the US is much less common on those same syllabi. Questions related to the new topics I highlighted earlier that will benefit from comparative studies include: How do histories of enslavement, colonialism, and migration, along with political economies and laws shape racial meaning, especially as it is produced in schools and universities? When and for which kinds of

groups does affirmative action in higher education arise, and how does it get institutionalized or contested? What kinds of extracurricular preparation exist in China and India to improve students' chances of passing university entrance exams or of gaining entrée into a top Western university, and what are the experiences and pathways of students through those mechanisms? Beyond single-case studies, qualitative cross-national comparative research is promising for its ability to both provide a reference group yet also address complexity of socio-cultural processes (for example, see P. L. Carter, 2012; Warikoo, 2011; Warikoo, 2016). While comparative qualitative research is expensive and time-consuming, and it does have a long tradition in education (see, for example, Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Whiting, Whiting, & Longabaugh, 1975).

Finally, while many of those cited above are young scholars of color, overall the lack of racial diversity in the field of sociology of education, especially when compared to the field of education, may be a symptom of the emphasis on documentation of disparity rather than documentation of mechanisms that can help us see a path forward. The popular but unrecognized field of CRT highlights the importance of voicing the perspectives of marginalized groups, who historically have not been the writers of history and the documenters of our social world (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It also suggests that activism be a central part of the work of scholars. While a new sociology of education may not fully embrace this direction, it must contend with the calls for greater inclusion in who researches, what they research, what they do with that research, and what kinds of research get labeled as 'rigorous'.

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<sup>i</sup> Interestingly, the one theoretical debate that Steven Brint finds in his review of ten years of articles in the journal *Sociology of Education* is the debate about anthropologist John Ogbu's theory of oppositional culture, a cultural theory about race and school success. Each of the articles on oppositional culture critiques the theory in some way, as have scholars in other venues (e.g., P. Carter, 2005; Harris, 2011; Warikoo, 2011). While the debate is indeed theoretical and adjudicated through empirical studies, many have suggested that Ogbu's theory of culture is relatively weak. As the field moves ahead, scholars should identify new questions related to race, ethnicity, culture, and education that go beyond the oppositional culture debate.

<sup>ii</sup> Class of 2001. At Ivy League universities, Asian American enrollment has remained somewhat consistent since then (Unz, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> This issue is not endemic to the sociology of education. While two recent presidents of the American Sociological Association, voted by the organization's full membership, have been scholars affiliated with critical theory (Patricia Hill Collins and Evelyn Nananko), just *one* article in its flagship journal has referenced critical theory (J. M. Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> Mehta and Davies (this volume) discuss the historical roots of this disconnect.